

Exodus 20:1-17  
1 Corinthians 1:18-25  
John 2:13-22  
Psalm 19

Lent 3B  
St. Barnabas Bainbridge Island  
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### Location, Location, Location

One of the things I love about the Episcopal tradition is the lectionary. I don't always love the difficult passages I have to wrestle with, but even the difficult passages offer a sense of freedom I wouldn't feel if I were to choose the scripture to preach on each week. In the first place, there is too much to choose from. In the second place, everything would be lopsided. Being given words to preach on is a gift. And especially on days like today, when the Hebrew scriptures – the old testament reading... and the Christian scriptures – the new testament reading connect so beautifully, I am particularly delighted.

What connects the ten commandments with Jesus cleansing the temple, you ask? Well, let's have a look. In our children's Godly Play program there is a story called the Ten Best Ways. It is the story about a God who loved the People so much that God showed them the Ten Best Ways to Live. Here is a bit of how that story goes.

*As Moses led the people across the desert toward the promised land, they followed fire by night and smoke by day. They began to complain. Some even wanted to go back to Egypt where they had been slaves. There was not enough food. There was not enough water. God helped Moses find food and water. Finally they came to the great mountain. The People came close to the mountain, but they were afraid to touch it. Mount Sinai was covered with fire and smoke. Moses was the only one who had the courage to climb up into the fire and smoke to meet God. When Moses was on top of the mountain, he came so close to God, and God came so close to him, that he knew what God wanted him to do. God wanted him to write the Ten Best Ways to Live on stones and bring them down the mountain to the People. God gave the Ten Commandments to Moses. Moses gave them to the people, and they gave them to us.*

*Don't serve other gods.  
Make no idols to worship.  
Be serious when you say my name*

*Keep the Sabbath holy.  
Honor your mother and father.  
Don't kill.  
Don't break your marriage.  
Don't steal.  
Don't lie.  
Don't even want what others have<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Jerome W. Berryman, The Complete Guide to Godly Play Volume 2: 14 Presentations for Fall (2002), pp. 73-80.

Those 10 best ways to live, what we call the 10 commandments, were an entirely new way of life for the Israelites who for centuries had been slaves in Egypt. These were people walking toward a new way of life, but there was so much chaos and complaining. *'If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger.'* Exodus 16:3  
Moses brought them out of slavery, yes, but into what?

When God offered the 10 best ways, God gave Israel a new way to live, where everyone, even former slaves were free to love God and each other, free to experience sabbath rest and refreshment, free to care for one another, free to honor the ancestors who had been oppressed before them, free to worship their God. This law was given to bring Israel out of a world of utter chaos and destruction, into a world where values could be named and held in common, where their common life mattered so much that the wishes of each individual gave over to the greater good. The commandments were given to set God's people free, not to confine them. The commandments were a gift because they offered an ethical structure that people could say 'yes' to, a way of being that would offer abundant life. We might say that the 10 Commandments are indicators of the common good, reinforcing the things that nurture human life, and warning us to avoid the things that tear lives and communities apart. The commandments are proof that God chooses to wander with God's people, proof of God's presence – not just with Moses, but with all of God's people, then and now.

It's not so easy to see abundant life, or freedom, or God present with us as the point Jesus was making when he went crashing through the temple, turning over the money changer's tables and driving out the animals. There aren't very many stories that happen in all four of the gospels, but this is one of them. In Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus cleanses the temple after coming to Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, knowing he is well on his way to the cross and death. In these gospels, Jesus claims that the moneychangers have made the Temple a "den of thieves" (Mk. 11:15-19, Lk. 19:45-46, Mt. 21:12-13) who exploit and defraud the poor. When Jesus cleansed the temple in Matthew, Mark and Luke, he was attacking both the religious and political structures of his time. And that sent Jesus to his death.

In John's gospel, the temple cleansing comes at the beginning, only the second story we hear. It happens immediately following the wedding at Cana where Jesus turned water into wine and made the first of the mystical, miraculous signs this gospel is known for. In John's gospel, Jesus made his first public appearance at a wedding, where his first miracle, turning water into wine, showed God to be generous beyond imagining.

And upon leaving that happy event, Jesus made his way to Jerusalem and annihilated not just the temple, but the entire sacrificial worshipping structure of his people. In Judaism, the temple was quite literally the place where God was to be found. While some point to this event as proof that Jesus was human, that he was angry because the temple had been turned into a marketplace, that isn't John's point. All this happened at Passover, when Jerusalem was flooded with pilgrims who'd come from faraway places to make their obligatory sacrifices at the temple.

In those days, religious offerings were first fruits – the best animals, the best produce, the very best of everything, and all these were to be offered to God. But it wasn't easy to drive a herd of sheep or cattle or even turtle doves for miles on end and arrive with perfect and pristine specimens, so pilgrims sold their first fruits at home, brought the money from those first fruits to the temple, and bought pristine animals for sacrifice there.

That explains the presence of, and the need for animals in the temple. They were a significant part of the religious economy. The money changers had to be there too because the money people received for the sale of their first fruits bore the faces of politicians who were worth nothing in the temple, so that money had to be exchanged for temple money - money that was useful. That was the religious economy of Jesus' day. The sacrificial system was the way of their worship, a way of worship that went back thousands of years. It was the way people thought worship would always be. But then Jesus came. And when Jesus came, everything changed. He didn't go crashing through the temple because he was human and angry and needing to correct moral deficiencies.

What Jesus did that day was to proclaim loud and clear, that God no longer required temple sacrifices, that Jesus was to be the once for all sacrifice that ended the sacrificial temple system. What he did that day was proclaim that God's location had changed. No longer to be found in the temple system, God was now to be found in the person of Jesus. Up until this time, the temple was the place where human and divine met. But when the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, humanity became God's chosen dwelling place, and all those sacrifices people thought they needed to make, were no more.

Where we meet God, how we encounter the Holy, is a question virtually every religious tradition engages. As Episcopalians who sit in mostly the same pews most every Sunday, we might be tempted to think that God is found in the fourth pew on the left on Sunday morning at 10am. While God is surely present in our worship and in the bread and wine of communion, God is also clearly present in each one of us.

Where do you encounter the holy these days? One of the gifts of this Lenten season, this time of turning inward and reflecting on our lives in God, is the recognition that God can be found in kneading bread, in walking on the beach or in the woods, in the stars in the heavens, in the love of people dear to us, in the kindness of strangers. Lent is a particularly good time to reflect on God present to us and in us, always and everywhere.

We do ourselves a terrible disservice when we read the gospels the same way we'd read a newspaper or an historical narrative. The fact that Matthew, Mark and Luke make the story about corruption and oppression and John makes the story about God being located in the person of Jesus Christ, doesn't need to send us into a crisis of faith or even a hunt for the "correct" interpretation. The gospels are confessions of faith written for hopeful communities that were struggling to hold fast to a faith that was uncharted and often persecuted. They were written for people who needed encouragement and the good news of Jesus Christ and the Kingdom of love he ushered in, both 2,000 years ago, and today.

When Moses brought the ten best ways to live down the mountain, the people of God knew God was with them. When Jesus entered the temple and proclaimed himself the new locus of God, the people of God knew God was with them, too. Living for love alone, not making idols, always seeking the common good, recognizing God as our center and always in our midst, these are just a few of the things these two stories share, and offer us. The living God who was and is and is to come, is everywhere we are. How will you notice? And how will you respond? Amen.